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ABSTRACT

Like many immigrants to the American colonies, Thomas Fitzsimons demonstrated his devotion to his adopted land by helping to defend it during the Revolutionary War. This booklet on Fitzsimons is one in a series on Revolutionary War soldiers who signed the U.S. Constitution, and it covers his political involvement in Philadelphia's (Pennsylvania) protest against the Coercive Acts, his military service, and his public service to Pennsylvania as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and as a legislator. Personal data about Fitzsimons and a bibliographic essay of further readings are also included. (DJC)

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Thomas Fitzsimons

SO 019 494

Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution
A Bicentennial Series
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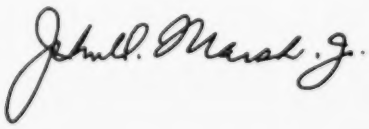
Introduction

In September 1987 the United States commemorates the bicentennial of the signing of the Constitution. Twenty-two of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution were veterans of the Revolutionary War. Their experiences in that conflict made them deeply conscious of the need for a strong central government that would prevail against its enemies, yet one that would safeguard the individual liberties and the republican form of government for which they had fought. Their solution is enshrined in the Constitution. The President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the nation's military forces. But it is the Congress that has the power to raise and support those forces, and to declare war. The Founding Fathers established for all time the precedent that the military, subordinated to the Congress, would remain the servant of the Republic. That concept is the underpinning of the American military officer. These twenty-two men were patriots and leaders in every sense of the word: they fought the war, they signed the Constitution, and they forged the new government. They all went on to careers of distinguished public service in the new Republic. Their accomplishments should not be forgotten by those who enjoy the fruits of their labors. Nor should we forget the fortieth man whose name appears on the Constitution. The Secretary was the twenty-third Revolutionary veteran in the Convention, who continued his service to the nation as one of its first civil servants.

This pamphlet was prepared by the U.S. Army Center of Military History with the hope that it will provide you with the background of a great American; stimulate you to learn more about him; and help you enjoy and appreciate the bicentennial.



John O. Marsh, Jr.
Secretary of the Army

THOMAS FITZSIMONS
Pennsylvania

Thomas Fitzsimons, who represented Pennsylvania in the Constitutional Convention, viewed government as a logical extension of the relationship that existed among families, ethnic communities, and business groups. His own immigrant family, Philadelphia's Irish-Catholic community, and the city's fraternity of merchants all figured prominently in Fitzsimons' rise to wealth and status, and he sought a government strong enough to protect and foster the natural interplay of these elements in a healthy society.

Experiences in the Revolution reinforced Fitzsimons' nationalist sympathies. Like many immigrants, he demonstrated his devotion to his adopted land by springing to its defense. Participation at the battle of Trenton and the later defense of Philadelphia convinced him of the need for central control of the nation's military forces. Similarly, his wartime association with Robert Morris and the other fiscal architects of the nation convinced him that an effective national government was essential for the prosperity of the country. Though his talents brought him great wealth, Fitzsimons never lost sight of the aspirations and concerns of the common people. He retained their respect and affection because his career reflected not only a sense of civic duty but also a profound honesty. He judged each political issue on ethical grounds. "I conceive it to be a duty," he said, "to contend for what is right, be the issue as it may." Using this standard, he concluded with justifiable pride that the Constitution he helped devise was a "treasure to posterity."

THE PATRIOT

Fitzsimons' family came to Philadelphia from Ireland in the mid-1750s. His father died soon after settling in the New World, but not before providing an adequate education for his five children. Both Thomas and his twin sister Ann married into the city's growing community of Irish merchants. In 1763 Thomas went into business with his new brother-in-law, George Meade (the grandfather of the Civil War general), specializing in trade with the West Indies.

The new firm's emergence coincided with Parliament's attempt to restructure the British Empire in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War. Old laws designed to regulate commerce were supplemented by new revenue measures such as a Stamp Act in 1765 to fund troops stationed in the colonies. Merchants felt the burden directly and emerged as leaders of the resulting storm of protest. When Parliament reacted to the 1773 Boston Tea Party with punitive measures, which the Americans called the "Coercive Acts," Philadelphia merchants, including the partners in the prosperous George Meade & Co., were infuriated.

They felt that if British warships could close the port of Boston, no city in America was truly safe.

Such economic concerns thrust the young Fitzsimons into politics and the Patriot cause. In 1771 the city's merchants and tradesmen of Irish heritage had elected him as the first vice president of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, a politically powerful fraternal association. Popular respect for his political judgment and economic acumen led in 1774 to his election to a steering committee organized to direct the protest over the Coercive Acts and to the city's Committee of Correspondence, the Patriots' shadow government. In choosing him for these posts, the voters ignored a law that barred Catholics from elective office. Fitzsimons went on to represent the city in a special colony-wide convention held to discuss the crisis. Its deliberations led Pennsylvania to issue a call for a meeting of all the colonies—the First Continental Congress, which met in Philadelphia in September 1774.

THE SOLDIER

Pennsylvania's Quaker pacifist traditions had resulted in a unique military situation on the eve of the Revolution. Lacking a militia, the local Patriots had to organize a military force from the ground up by forming volunteer units, called Associators. Thanks to his wealth and wide-ranging connections in the community, Fitzsimons contributed significantly to this speedy mobilization. When Philadelphia's contingent of infantry (today's 111th Infantry, Pennsylvania Army National Guard) was organized, Fitzsimons, as a captain, raised and commanded a company in Colonel John Cadwalader's 3d Battalion.

During the summer of 1776 these citizen-soldiers faced their first crisis. A large British army, supported by the Royal Navy, attacked New York City, and Congress asked the nearby states to reinforce Washington's outnumbered Continental Army regulars. Pennsylvania sent the Associators to the Flying Camp, a mobile reserve stationed in northern New Jersey to prevent any sudden diversion of Redcoats toward Philadelphia, the national capital. Fitzsimons' company served in the cordon of outposts that under Colonel John Dickinson guarded the New Jersey shoreline. Although a month of active duty passed without incident, the assignment provided Fitzsimons valuable time in which to train his men.

In November, with New York secured, the British suddenly invaded New Jersey. This move caught the Americans with their forces geographically divided and badly outnumbered. While Washington began a slow withdrawal of his main force to safe positions on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River, Congress again called on the state for reinforcements. Fitzsimons' company went on duty on 5 December to cover the continentals' retreat. For the remainder of the month it guarded the river's Pennsylvania shore. Complaining in

Pen and ink drawing, by Marshall Williams, after ca. 1802 oil. Documentary evidence indicates the oil is a likeness of Fitzsimons painted by Gilbert Stuart.

his diary of the hardships the company was enduring in the bitter cold of that famous winter campaign, a company sergeant noted that Captain Fitzsimons was "very kind to our men." Concern for the well-being of others, a hallmark of Fitzsimons' military career that echoed through his later life, formed the basis of his broad political appeal.

Aware that a symbolic victory was needed to bolster civilian morale, Washington launched a counterattack on Christmas night. He chose Trenton, the winter quarters for a Hessian brigade, as his target. Plans called for a three-pronged dawn attack, with a large body of militia under Cadwalader crossing downstream to cut British reinforcement routes. Fitzsimons' company was in Cadwalader's column, but like most of the militia force, was unable to cross the river because of deteriorating weather. It thus did not share in Washington's great surprise victory, but it joined Washington several days later, in time to deal with a British counterattack. When General Charles Cornwallis reached Trenton on 2 January, the Americans slipped away in the dark and at dawn struck the enemy's rear guard at Princeton, smashing a second British brigade. Cadwalader's militiamen played a key role in the engagement, although Fitzsimons' company appears to have served in a reserve force. Washington moved on to northern New Jersey, forcing the British to abandon most of the state. Fitzsimons finally retired from active duty at the end of the month.

Pennsylvania authorities then asked him to serve on an eleven-member board to oversee the Pennsylvania navy, which formed the primary defense

of Delaware Bay and the river approaches to Philadelphia. In this role Fitzsimons not only helped plan the capital's defenses, but organized logistics, coordinated defense with neighboring states, and negotiated with a sometimes reluctant Continental Congress over regional strategy. The assignment also provided him with an important lesson when the British captured Philadelphia. Finding Pennsylvania's defenses too formidable along the river approaches to the city, the enemy sailed up the Chesapeake Bay, and, marching through poorly defended sections of Maryland and Delaware, attacked the capital from the south. Even then, the defenses Fitzsimons had worked so hard to create held out for several months. With Philadelphia, along with his home and business, in enemy hands, Fitzsimons came to understand that no matter how well organized and defended one state might be, its safety depended ultimately on the united strength of all the states.

When France entered the war on the American side in 1778, British strategy changed. The field commander, Sir Henry Clinton, evacuated Pennsylvania and turned his attention to the conquest of the southern states, thus ending Pennsylvania's need for frequent militia mobilizations. Although Fitzsimons was involved in supplying the French naval forces that occasionally called at Philadelphia, he was now free to concentrate on politics.

THE STATESMAN

Fitzsimons was concerned about the inflation and other serious economic problems that marked the latter years of the Revolution. Pennsylvania, burdened with a weak government, was unable to cope with these issues. Fitzsimons' experiences both in uniform and on the state's navy board convinced him that stronger central authority did not pose a threat to liberty and was in fact the only solution to the new crisis. Many leaders who felt this way were unpopular in Philadelphia because of their wealth, but Fitzsimons' reputation as a caring officer, as well as his work for the poor on numerous local relief committees, sustained his popularity. At this time he also became associated with the Patriot financier Robert Morris, helping to organize the banking facilities that Morris used to support the Continental Army and Navy in the last years of the war. In fact, Fitzsimons served as a director of the Bank of North America from its founding in 1781 until 1803.

Pennsylvania sent Fitzsimons to the Continental Congress in 1782. There he concentrated on financial and commercial matters, working closely with Morris and the nationalist faction led by Hamilton and Madison on developing a centralized economy. He supported the growth of domestic industry and the payment of the nation's debts, particularly those owed to the soldiers of the Continental Army, but he argued that it was essential "that the weight of the taxes fall not too heavily upon any particular part of the community."

Although his integrity impressed Madison, his political evenhandedness did not sit so well with the voters, who began to criticize his stand on fiscal matters. Chagrined by the criticism and distracted by business obligations, Fitzsimons resigned in 1783.

But Fitzsimons could not abandon politics. He accepted election to Pennsylvania's Council of Censors, a unique group that reviewed the constitutionality of executive and legislative actions. In 1786 he began the first of three terms in the state legislature, where he was a floor leader of the more conservative forces. He also represented Pennsylvania in a commission that met in 1785 with Delaware and Maryland to try to work out interstate commerce issues.

In 1787 the state selected Fitzsimons to represent it at the Constitutional Convention. There he spoke often on issues relating to commerce and finance, arguing that the central government should have the right to tax both exports and imports to raise revenue and regulate commerce—reiterating a position that he had advocated with little success in the Continental Congress. Following the completion of the Convention's work, Fitzsimons resumed his seat in the Pennsylvania legislature, where he led the fight for a special convention to ratify the Constitution, arguing that since the document derived its power from the people, the people must approve it through representatives elected solely for that purpose.

Fitzsimons sat for six years as a Federalist in the new House of Representatives. He served on several important committees and was chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. He also chaired the committee that organized the government of the Northwest Territory, and, in the aftermath of the Army's defeat by Indians in 1791, presided over a select committee that investigated the matter. That committee set an important precedent by asserting that the Congress, under the powers vested in the first article of the Constitution, had the right to oversee the President's handling of military affairs.

Defeated in 1794, Fitzsimons devoted the rest of his life to business and charitable affairs. Financial reverses in old age did not shake his faith in the common man, nor his sense of obligation to those less fortunate than himself. In a fitting tribute to Fitzsimons' abiding sense of civic duty, a contemporary noted the fact that "he died in the esteem, affection and gratitude of all classes of his fellow citizens."

The Congress shall have Power . . .
To raise and support Armies . . . ;
To provide and maintain a Navy;
To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia . . . ;

ARTICLE I, Section 8.

Personal Data

BIRTH: In 1741, in Ireland (exact date and place unknown)
OCCUPATION: Merchant
MILITARY SERVICE:
Pennsylvania Militia—3 years
Highest Rank—Captain
PUBLIC SERVICE:
Continental Congress—2 years
House of Representatives—6 years
DEATH: 26 August 1811, at Philadephia, Pennsylvania
PLACE OF INTERMENT: St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church Cemetery, Philadelphia

Further Readings

Biographical information about Fitzsimons can be found in E. C. Burnett, "The Catholic Signers of the Constitution," in Herbert Wright, *The Constitution of the United States* (1938); James Farrell, "Thomas FitzSimons," *American Catholic Historical Society Records*, 39 (1928); Henry Flanders, "Thomas Fitzsimmons," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 2 (1878); and Martin Griffin, *Thomas Fitz Simons, Pennsylvania's Catholic Signer of the Constitution of the United States* (1887). Other books which shed light on the creation of the Constitution and the role of the military in the early history of the nation include Sol Bloom, *The Story of the Constitution* (1937); Catherine Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia* (1966); Edmund Burnett, *The Continental Congress* (1941); Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*; H. James Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress* (1974); Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence* (1971); Merrill Jensen, *Making of the Constitution* (1979); Richard Kohn, *Eagle and Sword* (1975); Clinton Rossiter, *1787: The Grand Convention* (1966); U.S. National Park Service, *Signers of the Constitution* (1976); and Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (1969).

Cover: *Scene of the Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, by Howard Chandler Christy, courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.